

A “good” God and a “bad” God

The existence of evil in the world is a topic on which much has been written. From as far back as ancient times, there have been religions which actually claimed that there are two gods in the universe: the benevolent and the malevolent creator. The Manichaeans supported such a belief, while nowadays this notion of diarchy (dual authority) is clearly denoted by the oriental symbol of Yin and Yang.

We shall examine this matter in detail here, based on the essay by Saint John of Damascus, “Dialogue against Manichaeans”, which we warmly recommend for reading, for more details on the topic.

What is “evil”?

Can two equal yet opposite gods coexist?

Can evil be personified?

Is God necessarily “good”?

Is the physical body “evil”?

Before giving a reply to the question “is there a bad god?” it is imperative that we first examine certain details regarding the nature of evil. So, what exactly is “evil”? Those who believe in the diarchy of a good and a bad God, usually assert that these two gods are two separate beings, who have co-existed forever, and who comprise the two equal-powered and co-eternal principalities of the world, while they are simultaneously at war with each other. In this way, an attempt is made to explain the battle between good and evil that is observed around us on a daily basis. However, this is also where the error of this philosophy begins.

In order for something to be referred to as a “being”, it needs to be “existent”. So, is evil a “being”? Let’s take a look.

“Evil” is the exact opposite of “good”.

Consequently, if “good” things = existence, knowledge, acquisition, non-deterioration, beginninglessness, movement, light, logic, omnipotence, etc., then “evil” things must be the exact opposite: nonexistence, ignorance, deprivation, deterioration, impermanence, motionlessness, darkness, irrationality, weakness...

We can observe therefore, that “evil” is the absence of “good”. Thus, “darkness” = the absence of light and “ignorance” = the absence of knowledge. “Deprivation” = non-possession, and motionlessness = absence of movement. Consequently, if “good” is eternity, omnipotence and the existent, then “evil” is impermanence, weakness and nonexistence!

“Evil” cannot, therefore, be either omnipotent, or eternal, or even existent!

But then, how does evil “exist”? We see it manifested around us every day!

What we see around us as “evil” is nothing more than the absence of “good”, and not something self-existent.

So, can there actually be two equal yet opposite gods – the way that the faithful followers of Yin and Yang or the various neo-gnostic offshoots believe?

On the basis of the above, no. This is because:

1. If the “good” god is the one who is (=the existent one), then the evil one would be non-existent.
2. The “bad” god would lack every notion of “good” and as such, would be neither omnipotent, nor eternal, or all-knowing or incorruptible.
3. Light always dissolves darkness, therefore is always the more powerful of the two.
4. There cannot be a simultaneous co-existence of two omnipresent and opposing authorities, because that would lead to confusing between the two and there could be no distinguishing between which is “good” and which is “bad”.
5. The principal of two is one; consequently, the one should precede the other and therefore there cannot be two principalities.

6. If something beginningless is logically timeless, it must necessarily be unchanging. If, therefore, it is unchanging, it cannot be divided, but specific.

7. If two, entirely opposite principalities exist, they cannot have collaborated during creation. Therefore the creative principality of the universe is only one.

8. With two equal and opposite principalities, there would have been anarchy. Given that anarchy is the absence of order, we would have had only one principality: that of evil.

9. The two opposing principalities would have at least communed during their existence. However, because existence is a good thing, something entirely evil cannot exist.

10. If the principalities were indeed two, then "BEING" would be the only true principality.

11. The "One Who Is" is the cause of "being", and not the opposite. Consequently, the causal beginning of everything is only one: "the One Who Is", i.e., benevolence and not evil, i.e. the absence of being.

12. The beginning (existential, temporal, topical and energetic) of every being, has one starting point, and not two. Consequently, one is the beginning of all.

13. A non-being, as an absence, needs to acquire its beginning from a being.

14. A non-being cannot be within the realm of a being, because it perceives good as evil.

15. If there a battle does exist between the two opposites, then there cannot be changelessness.

16. Neither of the two could be omnipotent and limitless, unless the one had power over the other.

17. If evil were indeed self-dependent, then the good would not be truly good if it did not subjugate it.

(To assert that “God is one” is reasonable, with regard to His essence and to causality. But this does not apply to the number of hypostases that He might have, given that in the beyond–Time–and–Space status of the infinite God, numbers are meaningless, as they are used only to measure finite objects).

Can there really be a logical being that would be a carrier of evil?

Yes, there can, but only with the following presuppositions:

1. It must have acquired its beginning from the one and only benevolent God.
2. As an intelligent carrier of evil, it must have certain characteristics, such as logic, existence, energy, etc. However, given that these characteristics are good ones, evil cannot be absolute, but only partial. In other words, it would be a being that, albeit possessing certain positive characteristics, is lacking in other good characteristics.

If, therefore, the carrier of evil is a created being, how can the benevolent God have created something evil? If the evil being is created and is not entirely evil, it would mean that whatever good it possesses, it was given to it by its benevolent Creator. Thus, it was also given the freedom of choice, which is also a good thing.

But because whatever God makes is good, then it is only through personal choice that one can lose his positive elements and thus become evil. Consequently, evil is the consequence of a being’s personal choice of losing its positive elements. If there were no intelligent carriers of evil in the universe, then evil would not have existed, because everything would have been good, being creations of the absolutely benevolent Creator. If we were to consider that if it were indeed a non–intelligent creation, then it would be obvious that “good” and “evil” would not apply, given that a rock or a planet (for example) are unable to discern between good or bad, nor would these notions have any meaning for them anyway. In order therefore for “evil” to be evil, it presupposes a logical carrier, who is able to discern it, or to consciously choose it.

Is God therefore necessarily “good”?

Not perforce, but only at will; and by “at will”, we mean at His will.

However, let us look at this matter differently. If we were to agree (according to the above) that only one God can exist as Creator of the universe, it is obvious that He will create whatever He considers good enough to be created. Thus, necessarily, His

creation is “good” and will regard as “good” whatever He ordains as being “good”, and His Creation will rejoice in that, as does its Creator. If the Creator had wanted something different, again, that would have been regarded as “good”, by both Himself as well as His creation, consequently that too would have indeed been “good”.

Given, therefore, that “evil” is something relative, we could define that “evil is something that occurs without the approval of the Creator”, and that He is the only absolute point of reference.

It is wrong to consider “good” whatever pleases us, and “evil” whatever displeases us. There is apparent “good” and apparent “evil”. For example, the pain that originates from an operation can be perceived as something “evil”, and yet, in reality it is something beneficial, since it can be the cause of a patient’s therapy. Similarly, the imprisonment of a person may be perceived as something bad, however, when taking the protection of the general public into consideration, it is a good thing. On the contrary, the miscellaneous sensual pleasures that may be perceived as something good, because of the pleasant feelings that they cause. Quite often, however, they can lead to serious evils.

What can we say about the human body? Is it something evil?

There are religions nowadays which (like in the past) have perceived matter as something evil, and the spirit as something good. They maintain that matter is the prison of the soul and that with physical death the soul is released from its prison. (It is on this viewpoint that certain theories maintain the existence of a “benevolent” creator of the soul and an “evil” creator of the body).

It is on this same basis that many Protestant religions’ beliefs are based, according to which, the earth – being a material creation – has no place in God’s plans for the future; that it will be entirely destroyed and that “Paradise” is something non-material – something purely celestial. Thus, they speak of the salvation of the soul, but not of the body and the salvation of mankind, but not of the rest of Creation as well.

As seen above, the “interaction” between opposites is entirely contrary. How can “good” collaborate with “evil”, to create a “good” spirit inside “evil” matter? But, because Man is something “good” as a whole, and because he also has free will (which is something good also), he is wholly a creation of the benevolent only God.

Besides, if the body were exclusively evil and the soul exclusively good, there would exist only people with good souls while the body would be permanently an evildoer and unable to do anything good. If this were the case, the soul's object would have been death, and death would have been something good and life would have been something evil!

Consequently, the body is also a creation of the exclusively benevolent Creator. So, how can the supposedly "evil" god create such evil bodies inside the radiant kingdom that he hates? Or, how can a good god create good souls inside a despicable, dark body?

But then, where does the body's evil come from?

Well, "from exactly where the soul's evils come from"!

As mentioned, the deterioration of matter as well as of the soul, is something that came about on account of the benevolent "free will" that the only almighty and benevolent God gave to His creatures. And it is entirely up to each one of us how we intend to utilize that God-given gift: ie., for the increment (good) or the deprivation (evil) of the good gifts that God gave us.

Text: N. M.

Translation by A. N.